# A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Author's note: Oh look, it's a Timewatch disappears for 10 months episode. I bet you guys are tired of reruns, aren't you? Last time I complained about my god-awful job, and it got so bad I transferred departments to something slightly less awful. Then I got an ancient car that I needed to learn to drive and then get it to stop doing things like leaking out four quarts of oil in a few days. Because I hate myself. At the same time, I started learning a language because I thought I was going to another country for a bit but it never panned out so I dropped that and started learning an entirely different language that's much harder and not even written in the Latin alphabet, which I'm also balancing with aforementioned job. Because I hate myself. But I never gave up on writing this, I've been slowly chipping away at the end of this arc, and now it's ready to go. So, on to another temporary revival which won't last long! Why? Because- You know what, I'm not even going to say it.

**Chapter Twelve**

Time had lost all meaning to Obi-wan Kenobi. How long had he been in this cell, with only that blinking light for company? A week? A month? A year? Every moment passed as a lifetime. Sometimes food and water showed up, sometimes it didn't. Obi-wan could only fall back onto meditation. The Force was no longer as soothing as it had once been, though. There was a disturbance. It was as if some tremor was running beneath the waves of a vast ocean; the waters roiled and churned. Perhaps the death of Anakin had something to do with that. The prophecy of the Chosen One was wrong, it seemed.

Obi-wan had come to terms with the demise of his best friend and student. It was not the nature of a Jedi to rage against fate or destiny. Anakin's passing was the will of the Force. To what end it would play, none could see, but Obi-wan had faith that there was a reason behind it. There had to be. Anything else would be a waste of life and potential. Obi-wan did not believe the Force wasted any life in the universe, no matter how stupid or random it seemed. What weighed most on his mind was how two other people who had been close to Anakin were taking his death. It had been many months since he last saw either Ahsoka or Padme-

Then, something happened. The cell shook. Or rather, *Invisible Hand* shook. He'd almost forgotten he was on a ship. Were they being attacked? Was this some kind of rescue attempt? The shaking went on, and he could feel the rumble of the engines growing through the floor. The first clear thought in an eternity entered his mind: *We're accelerating.*

It took all of Obi-wan's focus to bring himself into the here and now, to become aware of his surroundings and conditions again. The shaking and rumbling grew greater. At some point in the past, Grievous's magnaguards had loosened his restraints so that he could lie down, stand up, and even walk a little. Obi-wan was grateful for that small mercy, as it allowed him to start stretching what was left of his muscles. He could feel it in the Force: opportunity was near. He didn't know what it was, or when it would come, but there was a change in the winds of fate.

Perhaps it was a second, perhaps it was an hour, or maybe a day, but that change came. The cell door wooshed open, and the bulky silhouette of a magnaguard was framed against the blinding light beyond, its two red eyes shining at Obi-wan. "Stand up," the droid ordered.

Obi-wan did as told, slowly and unsteadily. "What-" he coughed, he hadn't said anything in a long time, "What's going on?"

"Your presence has been requested on the bridge," said the magnaguard. It grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him out of the cell. "Put on the vacuum suit."

"What?" Obi-wan raised a hand against the light, and made out the blurry image of a spacesuit.

"Your species cannot sustain itself in a vacuum. Put on the vacuum suit," ordered the droid.

Well, there was no fighting that. Obi-wan did as told, and the droids took him out of the brig, and into a hallway that looked completely normal, but for the lack of sound. Again and again, the ship shook and shuttered. *There must be a battle, that's why this area is depressurized.* "What's going on?" he asked the magnaguards, over the suit's comms.

There was no answer.

When they encountered a bulkhead that had been blasted away to reveal the void beyond, Obi-wan knew for sure there was a battle going on. They had to magnetize their feet and walk on the wall to get around the gaping wound; luckily artificial gravity was not functioning here. And finally, after that, they arrived at the bridge. As soon as they were in a pressurized zone again, Obi-wan removed his helmet, and in they went.

To Obi-wan's surprise, there was no Grievous present. Instead, a nemoidian craned his head around the command chair. "Ah, General Kenobi," he spoke, "just in time."

"I can't imagine why I've been brought here," Obi-wan said. He saw red laser streaks fly by, outside the windows. *Red, not blue,* he realized. Those weren't Republic guns firing at them.

"Allow me to introduce myself: I am Captain Lushros Dofine, commanding officer of the *Invisible Hand,*" said the nemoidian.

"Well met," Obi-wan said. This Separatist seemed to have some manners, at least.

"I apologize for my terseness, but we are tight on time. It is said the Jedi have mind-tricking powers, yes?" asked the captain.

"We may," said Obi-wan, putting a hand on his now-long beard.

"My enemy has called on me to surrender this ship, or else we will be destroyed. As proud as I am of this ship, destruction will surely be our fate, unless we can call for help. And that would mean getting the enemy to turn his jammers off."

"I see... Your intention is to have my trick your enemy into doing that, with my Jedi powers?" asked Obi-wan.

Captain Dofine clasped his hands together, and smiled. "Precisely."

"And why would I agree to help you, my captor?"

"I have no intention of surrendering, General Kenobi," said Dofine. He kept his smile, but there was a steely hardness in his eyes. Nothing else needed to be said.

"Very well," sighed Obi-wan. "I have no intention of dying on Grievous's ship either. Who is your enemy?"

"Some Commerce Guild sycophant with too much firepower and too little tactical grace," Dofine said.

"And why are you fighting your ally?"

"There has been some disagreement over the succession of Count Dooku." Dofine looked off to the side, narrowing his eyes and frowning. "They got the jump on us, I admit, but they've lost the element of surprise. Even if we die here, it won't be long until help arrives. But... I'd rather not die here."

"Open up a line, then," said Obi-wan. Of course, doing a mind trick on someone from thousands of kilometers away was different from doing it a meter away. Only the most powerful of Force-users could focus their abilities like that. It took a level of concentration few could attain. Obi-wan had never tried it, but there was a first time for everything, he supposed.

A viewscreen lowered from the ceiling, and on it appeared a gossam. Obi-wan made sure he was outside the screen's field of vision. "Have you come to your senses, yet, Dofine?" asked the gossam.

"You were right, Veng," said Dofine. "My ship will not long survive this."

"Then you surrender?" Veng asked, his beady eyes narrowing in what could only be suspicion. "This does not seem like a surrender."

"I have one condition."

"Of course..." sighed the gossam.

While the two had spoken, Obi-wan had been narrowing his focus across the vast gulf of space. He had tuned out everything, waiting for the Force to guide him to the right moment. And guide him it did.

"Turn off your jammers," said Dofine.

"Hah! As if!" laughed Veng.

*Now.* Obi-wan stepped up beside Dofine's chair. "You will turn off the jammers," he commanded, waving his hand.

"No, I won't- Who are you, anyway?"

"You *will* turn off the jammers."

"I-"

He could feel the universe straining around him. Obi-wan stared down the gossam, leveling every ounce of his power against him. "You *will* turn off the jammers," he spoke again.

"I will turn off the jammers..." muttered Veng, waving to an unseen person on his bridge.

"They've stopped jamming us," a droid on *Invisible Hand* announced.

"Yes!" Dofine exclaimed, jumping up from his chair and rushing forward. "Get in contact with Admiral Tuuk immediately!" Obi-wan took a moment to gather his composure again, and slipped his hand onto the chair's console.

He was too distracted to see Obi-wan searching for a particular number in the starship's computer.

Using the service passages, Horthy, Cathida, and Wendil had gone around to the other side of the building. Esera and Lirka stayed put until they heard the blaster fire begin. "Let's go," Esera said.

"Right behind you!" said Lirka, patting her shoulder.

As expected, the hall was deserted. They found the blank wall, that according to the blueprints, at least, masked the elevator shafts. Esera took out her lightsaber, but before she could turn it on, her companion's mood made an immediate change.

"That looks like a lightsword..." muttered Lirka, her eyes narrowing.

"You've seen one before?" asked Esera, surprised.

"Every Sephi has. A Jedi murdered our king when he refused to surrender us to the Republic." That suddenly guarded and wary look said everything else Esera needed to know about her feelings towards Jedi.

*Well then...* This just got that much more complicated. Esera swallowed nervously, and took a deep breath. "Lirka... I tried to do one decent thing in this awful war, and all I got for it was exile and betrayal. I never wanted to be here, but here I am. So I guess I'm a Separatist now. I mean, I've got nowhere else to go. No one else to turn to. You're the only ones in the whole galaxy who don't want me dead. Hell, you're the only ones who have actually helped me."

Esera pushed the ignition button, and the green blade of light leapt out of the hilt. "So why not rescue General Grievous? What more could possibly go wrong with my life?" She stabbed into the wall, and began cutting.

The young sephi was silent. She was staring at Esera, confused and shocked, but more confused. No doubt, like many Separatists, she'd gotten the idea in her head that the Jedi were bloodthirsty killers, masters of a slave-soldier army that sought to crush their dreams of self-determination and subjugate them back into a broken and dying system. What must it have been like for her, to have one of these legendary sorcerer-warriors right next to her? To realize that even a Jedi could be as pathetic, lost, and alone as Esera was? Esera finished the first cut, and pulled out the panel of metal with a tug through the Force. She flipped it over, and extended it out through the elevator shaft until it touched the other wall.

"You're the counterweight, now," Esera told Lirka. "Hold this end down, sit on it if you have to."

Lirka did as ordered, and Esera walked out on the narrow panel. It creaked and bent under her weight, but it held. She jammed her blade into the next wall, and cut as fast as she could. The blaster fire was growing nearer, her fellow resistance fighters were being driven back. *Come on...* she thought. *Almost there...* Aha! Esera kicked down the square hole in the wall, and jumped through...

...only to come face to face with the cyborg himself. A pile of cables surrounded him, but he stood tall and free, fists clenched. He'd broken himself out already.

Esera stared at Grievous, lightsaber still blazing in her hand. *I could finish him, right now,* she realized. *I could do it, right here.* How many lives would she save? How many lives would she condemn? Would the Separatists surrender with his death? Or would they melt away and turn into an unending insurgency which would bleed the galaxy dry?

Grievous was staring back at her, hunched forward, ready to spring. He knew what she was thinking. "*Go. You're not worth killing,*"he'd told her the other day. The power to do so was in his grasp, he could have ended her life at that moment, but he didn't. And despite all the awful things Esera had heard about this cyborg, she couldn't bring herself to pay back his mercy with such treachery. No, she was on his side now, whether she liked it or not. Oh, how horrid a fate! She lowered her blade, and relaxed her stance.

"I suppose we're even, then," Esera said.

"Hmph," Grievous snorted, snatching up his cape. "You should have done it."

"I'm not a murderer," Esera told him.

"It would not be murder to kill someone as dangerous as me any more than it would be murder to kill a Jedi," Grievous said. "You are a fool, girl."

"If it means never becoming what you are, I can live with that." Esera turned away, to the door of the suite. The gunfire outside had stopped.

Grievous suddenly growled. "My lightsabers aren't here."

"What a shame," said Esera. The Gossams had played it smart by hiding his weapons. Then, the cyborg's head whipped up and around towards the still-shut door. A second later, he was bolting for the hole Esera had cut through the wall. Esera was following him as soon as she saw the door opening. Grievous didn't go for the other side of the elevator shaft, though; he wrapped his claws around the oily cable and just slid off into the darkness below. Lirka was nowhere to be found on the other side, Esera imagined she'd made herself scarce quite quickly. *Here we go again,* she sighed.

Grievous was fast, he'd already pried the doors open and bolted into the hall by the time Esera reached the bottom of the shaft. She wasn't quite sure where she was, but given the tall windows letting in streams of pale light that lined the far side of the hall, it had to be something akin to a main entrance. A few days ago, she'd probably come through here, but she'd been so distracted that she didn't remember anything of it. Where was that cyborg though?

*There he is!* Grievous had stopped to look at one of those maps public buildings often had, usually featuring arrows pointing to a spot proclaiming *"You are here!"* He didn't seem to care more Gossam soldiers were rushing towards him. In fact, Esera didn't even think he was aware-

Then, that awesome and terrible creature suddenly rocketed towards the Gossams, swinging himself around as he flew through the air and landing amongst them with as much carnage as a giant buzzsaw. Perhaps he had been aware after all, Esera decided. Then, he noticed her too.

"Are you still here?" Grievous asked her.

"I really don't have a choice," Esera said, in a voice more desperate than she would have liked.

That got a laugh out of him, more hearty than she'd heard from him on their last meeting. "Then you would not mind if I borrowed your lightsaber?"

"What?!"

"Give it to me, girl. I prefer not to take trophies from enemies I don't kill in combat. You can have it back when I am done," said Grievous, as if it was an entirely reasonable request.

"And you're just going to leave me here with nothing?" Esera shook her head. "No. Break a window or something, and we can go our own ways."

Grievous growled again. "Here's the deal: give me the lightsaber, and I grant you asylum in the Confederacy. Do not give it to me, and I treat you as an enemy of the state."

The offer must have surprised them both, because it seemed as if Grievous hadn't even expected himself to say that. Esera was completely blown away, until she heard more Gossams approaching. It was tempting to think that this was the time to choose her fate, but Esera knew she'd already chosen it three hours ago. *I'm one of them now.* Good heavens, was that a strange thing to think.

"Okay, fine!" Esera tossed her lightsaber to Grievous. He caught it, and nodded.

"Come with me if you want to live," Grievous said. Esera followed, trying not to think about the fact she'd just teamed up with one of her order's worst foes. The cyborg seemed to have no idea where he was going, he stopped at every corner and backtracked several times. After a few minutes of this, Esera had to speak up.

"The best way out is through a window, you know," she said. "They've sealed off the doors."

"They have a tank out there," Grievous told her.

"I didn't see one-"

"You're not listening to their communications," he said. "You should know, we're now to be killed on sight, not captured."

"Great," Esera sighed. "Everyone in the galaxy wants to kill me right now, except you of all people."

"Careful, girl, if you whine too much, I'll change my mind about that. Then you'll really be in trouble!" Grievous chuckled again.

Esera did not appreciate the remark. *I don't even think that was a joke...* After a few more minutes of being chased around by Gossams, it became clear that the were being herded into a certain section of the building. It was the same tactic that Esera and her master had once used against Separatist rebels that had been attempting to infiltrate a planetary governor's palace. Sometimes a net worked better than a spear, her master had said.

Grievous made an abrupt turn into a bathroom. To her confusion, all he did was smash a mirror and pick up the biggest shard. *What's he going to do with that?* The answer was blindingly obvious once he fused it to a cut piece of piping with her lightsaber. *He's going to use it to look around corners, of course...*

Or over window ledges, as it turned out. The two of them approached the big windows while crouched down, and Grievous used his impromptu periscope to see what was happening outside. "If they're half as smart as they've shown themselves to be, they'll have all their thermal sights pointed at this gallery," he said. "The moment either of us is spotted through these, they'll send a missile our way. I might survive, but you won't."

"So what do... *we* do?" Esera asked. Using *we* to include Grievous made her feel dirty, she could not deny it.

"It's a good thing I need your Jedi magic, girl, or else I would have used you as bait by now," Grievous grumbled. He handed her the periscope. "Look at the tank."

"I see it," Esera said. It was an AAT, but painted black, with Grievous's implied missile launcher atop the turret.

"I am going to show myself, they are going to fire that missile. It will be a high explosive fragmentation warhead. You are going to use your Force powers to push the missile into the infantry over to the right. Do not push it back into the tank, it will do nothing to it. Is that clear?"

"I-"

"These are professional soldiers, girl, do not get sentimental. They are killers, they are ready to kill us, and they are fully ready to *be killed* by us."

"Okay," Esera said, trying not to sigh again. No matter what she did, the war sucked her back in.

"And don't get any funny ideas, either. If you let them kill me, they're still going to kill you."

"I get it!"

"Then the time is now." Grievous moved down the gallery by two windows, ignited her lightsaber, and popped up; he began cutting through the transparisteel. Esera followed him a second later, throwing out a wave through the Force. Her Jedi intuition proved correct again: the missile fired and immediately veered into the infantry near the tank.

By the time the tank's cannon had taken aim, Grievous was through the window and on the snowy-covered ground outside. Esera rushed after. By the time she was standing up, everything was over. Grievous had cut down the survivors, and now was forcing the tank's hatch open. By the time Esera had stumbled through the snow to the tank, Grievous had killed everyone inside and tossed their bodies out. "Get in," he ordered, "we're going to the array." Grievous took the driver's seat, Esera closed the hatch. "Do you know how to aim a cannon?" he asked.

"Not really-"

"Then don't go in the turret, you'll probably die." That was all Grievous had to say for the moment. His 'ears' kept tilting back and forth, and moving up and down. They must have been antennae; it would explain how he could hear what their enemy was saying. He threw the throttle forward, and Esera flew backward into the hatch.

"I better sit down..." she muttered. Her ally of convenience didn't offer his opinion, or even a glance; what counted as his face was pressed up against the viewscreen. Despite being part-machine, Grievous was anything but graceful in his driving. They bumped and bounced their way out of the square and into the city proper. Esera had to look through one of the gun cameras to figure out what was going on. They were going down a wide street, lined with tall buildings crammed so close together they probably were breaking fire code. Not one was the same as another. In the back of her mind, Esera recalled that Raxulon had a district named *the old city*. Were they there?

"We've got company," Grievous suddenly spoke up. He stopped the tank, stood up, and opened the hatch. "Move quickly," he ordered, striding into the snow.

Esera scampered after him, only to be tossed through the air. She let out a yelp of surprise before she landed face-down into a drift, as the tank exploded.

"Their gunship found us," said Grievous, ducking into a narrow alley. "But they will be reluctant to fire on areas of high population density. At least until Shu Mai orders them to."

"So we're using innocent people as shields?" Esera asked, frowning.

"Yes."

"How pathetic."

"Would it sooth your Jedi sensibilities if I walked out into the open for the Commerce Guild?"

"It actually might!" said Esera, crossing her arms and stopping where she stood. "You'd at least have one redeeming act in your life before you died."

Grievous stopped too, and turned back to face her, eyes narrowed. "And what do you know of my life?"

"Not a lot, but aside from hating us Jedi and causing mayhem wherever you go, there isn't much to you," Esera told him. Grievous blinked once, then twice, before looking away.

"I've thought the same as late," he said. Then Grievous turned forward again, and continued walking.

*What?* Esera asked herself. *What did he mean by that?* She sighed yet again, and trudged after him. The gunship's engines droned in the distance, the only sound besides their footsteps in the silent city.

"When you called me away from Kashyyyk, I didn't think we'd be doing something like this," Mar Tuuk said.

"Some things are too dangerous to know about beforehand," Nute Gunray told him. "If you'd known what I was going to ask you to do, you wouldn't have agreed to do it."

"You are certainly right," Tuuk muttered.

The two were aboard his battleship, currently in orbit of Raxus with the rest of the corporate armada. Tuuk's ship was one of few that bore the blue war-paint and white insignia of the Separatists, most of the others were in their company regalia. The force Shu Mai had assembled was small compared to the planetary defense fleet, but with the droids shut down, that didn't matter. The garrison fleet was orbiting helplessly, unable to do more than what little their few organic officers could manage manually. Those who had tried to fight were crushed.

Gunray was shocked that Shu Mai's plan had gone off so flawlessly. Grievous had never seen her plot coming. Her commandos didn't even need the help of the Koorivar and Nemoidians sent down to assist them. If all went to Shu Mai's design, then the Republic would take custody of Grievous and the Confederacy would surrender. They'd pardon the Council for taking down Grievous, right? Even if they'd committed high treason, at least they'd gone back into the fold willingly, right? At the very worst, they'd have to pay reparations and deal with anti-trust legislation, right?

His old friend was having the same thoughts. "What happens if the Republic actually accepts the deal Shu Mai has offered them?"

"I don't know," said Gunray. "I don't think the military would accept it."

"Ours, or theirs?"

"Both," Gunray sighed.

The Republic wanted an unconditional surrender, Palpatine had said that many times. The so-called Confederacy *must* be dismantled in its entirety, every single system *must* return to the union as they were before. They had to make it clear, now and forever, that the Confederate cause had been doomed to failure from the very start. The Separatist armies and fleets would be loathe to surrender without condition. In three years of war, Gunray had come to realize that were was real patriotism in the ranks of the commoners. He and his fellow tycoons had joined this affair to make a profit and secure their interests in a new galactic order; the Separatist military fought against a tyrannical galactic empire for their freedom. The Council might try to surrender, but they wouldn't.

"If you didn't think this plan would work, why join it? Why risk Grievous's wrath?" Tuuk asked, giving him a cold glare from his chair. "That's not very characteristic of you, is it?"

"Of course it wouldn't be, use your brain."

"So you *do* think this plan is going to work, for reasons unknown to me. That, or you're playing another game entirely..." The admiral clasped his hands under his chin, and leaned forward.

"Never make an entrance without an exit strategy," Gunray quoted from the galaxy-famous Trade Federation ship's manual.

"Ah, so you're playing for either side, waiting for a sign of which way the wind is going to blow." Tuuk nodded to himself. "A wise move, Viceroy."

"It's a mistake I've made many times, I won't make it again." Gunray paced back and forth across the bridge, glancing at the snowy northern hemisphere of Raxus. "What do you know of the Sith, Admiral?"

"Sith? The Empire that fought the Republic a thousand years ago?" Tuuk shrugged. "They've been gone a long time."

"If only that were so..." whispered Gunray, too softly for Tuuk to hear it. "What if I told you that none of this was ever supposed to happen," he said.

"I would ask if anything is ever truly supposed to happen. It is a universe of free will, we make of it what we will. Nothing is set in stone, except for that which has happened." As typical, Tuuk's love of learning caused him to miss the point entirely. Talking to him was useless.

*None of this was supposed to happen,* Gunray thought again. Everything that had happened in the past sixteen years had done so according to Sidious's design. From the faulty security droids that had killed every non-Nemoidian on the Trade Federation Directorate to the attack on Coruscant, Sidious had been behind it all. If it weren't for that accursed man, Nute Gunray would be a nobody to the galaxy at large. Just another face on the Directorate. Sidious had made him an offer he couldn't refuse. His only choice had been to do as he was told by the Sith lord, or he'd frame Gunray for the murder of the other directors.

He'd never been a player in the game. He was a pawn from the very start. None of this was supposed to happen; he hadn't wanted power and wealth, at least not for this price. Gunray would have given every credit he had just to go back and shut down those droids before they opened fire. To live the quiet life of business and management he'd been denied... No war, no politics, no plots.

*And here I am now, at the heart of all three.* Every curse in every language he knew ran through his mind, directed at Sidious. But Sidious was gone now, crushed beneath rubble on Coruscant or gunned down by Grievous's droids as just another anonymous casualty among thousands. Or abandoned his whole scheme after brain damage changed his personality. Whatever the means, Sidious was gone. Now, Gunray was a player. Now, he had a way out. And by every god in the universe, he was going to take it.

To avoid the gunship, Grievous had the brilliant idea of taking the 'detour' through Raxulon's subterranean labyrinth known as the old sewer. Luckily, sewage no longer flowed through this ancient system, but it was still dark, damp and cold. "Do you know where we're going?" asked Esera.

"Yes," Grievous said. "I am going uphill."

How he could tell he was going uphill was a mystery. If Esera had to guess, he probably had a gyroscope in his body somewhere that told him the precise angle he was moving at relative to gravitational pull. A grade imperceptible to humans would be apparent to him.

But what was not imperceptible to Esera was his breathing. It started as a small sound, before growing louder and louder, harsher and harsher. The coughing started small, too, one or two every few minutes, but each one was more severe than the last. *Is he sick?* Esera wondered. The cyborg refused to acknowledge the problem, even when he had to stop and double over from the latest coughing fit.

"Don't tell me you've got consumption," sighed Esera, leaning against the wall.

"Very funny," remarked Grievous. He stood up, and immediately was racked by another series of wheezes and coughs. "If I ever meet Windu in battle again, I will make his death slow and painful," he growled.

"We should probably stop for a bit," Esera said.

"No-!"

"Look, I need you alive so I can stay alive, alright?" sighed Esera. "Whatever Master Windu did to you, it got your pretty bad."

The cyborg could only growl again, before sitting down on a ledge. Esera sat too, and was about to slip into mediation, when her unlikely companion had something to say.

"What did they tell you about me?" Grievous suddenly asked. That question caught Esera off-guard.

"What do you mean? Like, at the Temple..?"

"Wherever. What do the Jedi know about me?"

"Not much. You really hate us, you're a cyborg with a mean streak ten kilometers wide, you were Dooku's pawn, that's about it." Esera hoped he wouldn't get mad at that last statement.

But, Grievous nodded. His voice had changed, it was softer and quieter than she'd ever heard it before. "That's as much as I know about myself."

"I don't believe you," said Esera.

"And yet, I have no clear memories before I entered this body..." Grievous stretched out one of his hands before his face, peering at the mechanical hand like it was something alien to him. "Everything before is a jumble of images and sounds. Some it makes sense. Much of it doesn't. There is no context, no order. I know nothing of who I was, before Grievous. It is as if I awoke in the life of another, a life not my own."

Moments like these, when Esera wondered if she really knew anything at all, were becoming far too common for her liking. Everything she'd been told about Grievous had prepared her for a madman who could kill and maim with impunity, who had no logic or rationality to his actions, only endless rage. But this Grievous? This really was an entirely different person. He was so completely at odds with what other Jedi had told her that Esera didn't know how to respond. Who was she talking to? What had he done with the raving lunatic Grievous? Where did this introspective creature come from? Why did he know nothing about himself?

"Tell me, girl," Grievous spoke again, "and in your own words, why are the Republic and Confederacy at war?"

"...You mean you don't know?" asked Esera. *If he doesn't even know why we're at war...*

"I said in your own words." Grievous narrowed his eyes, but the shame he felt was strong enough to be felt through the Force.

*He really doesn't know!* How incomprehensible was it that the leader of an entire side of a galactic civil war didn't know what he was fighting for!

"Where to even begin..." Esera put her chin in her hands, and looked at the floor. "I guess it was a long time coming, the Separatist Crisis. Discontent has been building for decades. Centuries, even, my master told me. You guys didn't come out of nowhere. Twenty thousand star systems don't secede without real reason. All it took was the right man at the right time to give them a voice."

"Dooku," said Grievous. "He used to make me listen to his political speeches, before the war began."

"You weren't actually listening, because those speeches have the answer to your question." The cyborg narrowed his eyes, but he didn't protest. *I must be right.* "Dooku rallied everyone who was upset with Coruscant but had no power to act. I was just a kid when this was all going down, but I remember it pretty well. He railed on the corruption, the stagnancy, the greed, the incompetence... But when you get down to it..." Esera paused. The only time she'd ever voiced this thought out loud, she'd ended up getting a visit from Republic Intelligence. "It's like Senator Amidala said: this war is represents a failure to listen. We- *they,* the Republic started this at Geonosis. They fired the first shots, they tried to keep the union intact by force rather than address the very legitimate complaints the Separatists had. And that proved every single thing Dooku said right. You had the morale high ground."

"Had..." Grievous tilted his head. "And then..?"

Esera gave him a disbelieving look. "*You* happened! It's like Dooku decided being a Sith – if he even was one – wasn't evil enough, he needed something even worse!"

"I can only imagine what wonderful tales your propagandists have dreamt up about me," said Grievous, giving her such a look that she could feel his condescending, smug smile, even if he didn't have a mouth. It really was like she was having a conversation with two different Grievouses, and they kept switching places with each other.

"There was no brain-rot plague?"

"There was, and it was entirely justified, you give my droids viruses all the time. I merely repaid the favor. There was some *collateral damage*."

"What about your enslaving operations?"

"Total lies, I despise slavers."

"And what you did to Humbarine?"

"Don't tell me you fell for that hoax!" Grievous sighed.

"Humbarine wasn't a hoax, those refugees didn't come from nowhere!"

"If I had *wanted* to destroy Humbarine, there wouldn't have been anyone left to escape," said Grievous. The fact he could speak so nonchalantly about killing billions made Esera clench her teeth. "One of my battleships suffered a malfunction in its hyperdrive, it hit the planet at light-speed. A few days later you paid us back the favor at Pammant. An eye for an eye, Dooku said. He thought it best not to escalate."

"So," Esera said, "are you telling me you're not as bad as I think you are?"

"I made no such implication," Grievous told her, waving a finger at her. "I have slain many Jedi in my search for vengeance, I have killed many innocents in my prosecution of this war, I have done many things you should hate me for."

"Jedi do not hate," said Esera, frowning nonetheless.

"If you were a Jedi, would you be here?"

How did she respond to that? It was true, the Order had expelled her when she was declared a traitor. The only reason she was here was because she had nowhere else to go. "Why do you want revenge on the Jedi?" Esera asked. To her knowledge, no one had ever bothered asking Grievous that. It was very silly, she thought, that it took *her* of all people to ask him why.

Yet again, Grievous had a confounding answer: "You tried to kill me."

"Of course we tried to kill you, you're trying to kill us!"

"No." He shook his head, getting that distant look again. "You tried to kill me before I became who I am today."

*Oh.*

"I have remembered that much of the past. The Jedi bombed my shuttle. But I do not know why." Grievous clasped his hands together, and leaned forward. "They are so sickeningly noble and sentimental... Anonymous bombs are not their style. What did I do to deserve such a dishonorable assassination attempt? It must have been something very bloody."

Esera realized the significance of this moment. While it was annoying, and mildly concerning, how quickly Grievous switched from a smug butcher to a confused amnesiac, she was closer than anyone else alive in the galaxy to figuring out his mysterious past. "Is this bombing why you're in that body?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Is it why your memory is so... scrambled?"

"No. That was Dooku."

Now *that* was interesting! "What did Dooku do?" asked Esera. She was beginning to get excited, the Republic would have killed for this intelligence. *Too bad they turned on me!*

"Against my wishes, he and San Hill modified my mind. Memory blockers, emotional inhibitors, aggression enhancers," said Grievous. "I did not find out until after his death at Coruscant, and I had them removed."

And just like that, every piece of the puzzle came together. "No wonder I feel like there's two of you in there," Esera said, pointing at his head. "There *are* two of you. This explains... everything, really. Dooku's Grievous, and Grievous's Grievous, I suppose. The former is a madman bent on spilling as much blood as possible, because that's what they turned him into. He was here just a minute ago. The latter is... whoever I'm talking to right now. It really must be like waking up in someone else's life."

Grievous was still for a minute, thinking on what she said. His expression grew increasingly troubled and uncertain, a look Esera would have never thought possible on him even a few hours ago. "You are right," he spoke at last, "I cannot deny that. Who they turned me into is not who I was."

"I think I understand now why you didn't kill me yesterday," Esera said. "Maybe whoever you were wouldn't have done that. Dooku's Grievous would have."

"I didn't kill you because you reminded me of someone. Someone in my life, long ago," said Grievous. He very pointedly looked away from her. "I don't know who. I am disgusted to have acted on sentiment. Perhaps I believe I am supposed to be disgusted, perhaps this is who I truly am. I don't know. I don't know what is me and what is Dooku's meddling. I don't even know why I'm telling you this."

*And there it is,* Esera thought. The enigma of Grievous laid bare, and at the same time, growing deeper than ever before. If Dooku really had altered Grievous's mind so much that it overwrote his true self, then was Grievous truly responsible for the things he'd done? If he'd even done those deeds as the Republic had claimed he did, some of which he denied? Was the idea of the person of Grievous being an insane, omnicidal warlord woefully wrong? Could his true self be recovered from the mess Dooku and his minions had made? Was his true self even someone worth recovering? There were so many questions going through Esera's mind that she didn't hear Grievous stand up, and didn't hear him speak until he prodded her with one of his talons.

"What?" she asked.

"Break time is over, we're moving out," he said.

*Damn!* Esera thought. There was still so much to learn!

Author's note al-thany: See you guts whenever chapter 13 is done. It mean, it's like 45% done right now, so... sometime before 2018, kek. RIP hopes and dreams of consistent updates.



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